
American Community Survey Design and Methodology (January 2014)

Chapter 16: Research and Evaluation



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16.1 Overview

Short and long-range planning of the ACS includes research and evaluation (R&E) activities on all aspects of the ACS program, including survey methodology and analytical research. This chapter will describe the process for identifying, prioritizing, and implementing R&E activities that comprise topics such as: experiments (quantitative and qualitative studies); simulations (e.g. alternative weighting methodologies, alternative filtering methods, variance estimation, etc.); feasibility and cost/benefit studies; and quality assessments and measurements of error. R&E projects span research on both housing units and group quarters. Every fiscal year, the ACS reprioritizes R&E projects based on new directives or changes in budgets.

The R&E program includes a specific subset of projects known as ACS Methods Panel tests. These are identified, prioritized and approved through the same R&E process. ACS Methods Panel tests are aimed at improving overall ACS data quality; achieving survey efficiencies; and developing and improving ACS questionnaire content and related data collection materials.

Annually, the R&E Working Group (WG), made up of ACS mid-level and senior-level managers, brainstorms R&E projects that are aligned with the ACS program's strategic objectives. In particular, for fiscal year 2013 (FY2013), which covers the period October 2013 to September 2014, all R&E projects align with these two strategic objectives:

- Accurate demographic, social, economic, and housing data products are published at all geographic levels or strategic objective
- Efficient, effective, and adaptable survey data collection methods

After the identification of a list of potential R&E projects, the R&E WG prioritizes the projects based on specific criteria for the fiscal year. For example, the criteria for FY 2013 are based on how closely the project aligns with these seven criteria:

1. The degree of strategic alignment
2. The benefits to stakeholders and/or data users
3. If it has a significant follow on benefit or is a dependency for future projects or programs
4. The urgency of the project
5. If it is mandatory
6. The technical feasibility of the project
7. The management feasibility of the project

Each project is ranked as high, medium, or low on each of the seven criteria by each member of the R&E WG; the rank is then converted into a utility score. Projects with a low utility score are deferred or denied, and an initial list of approved projects is identified.

After the initial list of approved R&E projects is determined, Census Bureau senior-level managers recommend appropriate high-level methodology and metrics for the research projects. These managers have a broad perspective on what research is in progress across the Census Bureau and may know of related external research that is relevant to consider. As a result of their input, other R&E projects may be identified for the ACS program. These new projects may be incorporated into the list. A final round of reviews takes place that includes the consideration of available resources and results in the approval of a list of R&E projects for the fiscal year.

The R&E projects are determined annually; however, additional R&E projects can be added anytime throughout the year. These projects go through a similar review process. The R&E WG reviews potential projects monthly and prioritizes the projects against the current approved projects and available resources. If the project is approved it will be incorporated into the ACS R&E project list for the fiscal year. Current projects may also be deferred based on available resources.

Researchers conduct the R&E projects with oversight and guidance from ACS senior-level managers. The researchers provide monthly status updates and request approval from ACS senior managers if the scope, time, or resources needed for projects change. Before research begins, the researchers develop a Research and Evaluation Analysis Plan (REAP). This plan outlines the history, motivations, and reasons for doing the project. It also explains, in detail, the research questions and the methodology and metrics used. Design assumptions and limitations are also discussed. Subject matter experts, known as critical reviewers, are assigned to review each REAP and to provide feedback and guidance on the methodology and research questions. After the incorporation of all feedback, the critical reviewers and the researcher's supervisors approve the REAP and research begins.

Once the research is complete, preparation of a written report begins to present the findings. After the report is drafted, it undergoes review and is briefed to the ACS R&E WG and ACS senior-level managers prior to being finalized. The final R&E reports are put into the ACS R&E memoranda series and made available to the public on the ACS web page located at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/library/by_series/acs_research_evaluation_program.